



Bernard C. "Jack" Young
Mayor

COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION

Tom Liebel, Chairman

STAFF REPORT



Chris Ryer
Director

August 11, 2020

REQUEST: 2426 Pennsylvania Avenue – Arch Social Club (Baltimore City Landmark):
Installation of marquee and LED signage

RECOMMENDATION: Approval, with final details to be reviewed at staff level

STAFF: Lauren Schiszik

APPLICANT/OWNER: Arch Social Club

ARCHITECT: Richard Wagner, David Gleason Associates

SITE/HISTORIC DISTRICT

This property is located on the west side of the 2400 block of Pennsylvania Avenue, just south of North Avenue (*Map 1 and 2*). For a significant portion of the 20th century, due to racially restrictive housing and property laws and Jim Crow segregation, Pennsylvania Avenue was the African American business district in Baltimore. It thrived with theaters, businesses, social institutions, and houses of worship, and it was also a hub of civil rights activism. This activism included the "Buy Where You Can Work" campaign in 1933-1934, which was a boycott against white-owned businesses that did not hire Black people. Following a decline in the later 20th century, Pennsylvania Avenue today has a designated Main Street program, and as of 2019, is the first designated Black Arts and Entertainment District in the country.

The Arch Social Club is housed in the former Schantze's Theatre, designed by Baltimore architect Paul Emmart and built in 1912 as a vaudeville and silent film theatre. In 1938, the property was sold to a new owner, and marked the start of approximately a decade of rapid change. Over the span of eleven years, the property cycled through several different owners, who ran theatres with different concepts, clientele, and names. During this short period of time, the theatre was called the Morgan, Uptown, and Cinema, had two stints as a theatre for African Americans, and at one point served as a theatre for Jewish immigrants, showing Yiddish films and hosting live entertainment. A marquee was added to the façade in 1942, according to Amy Davis, author of *Flickering Treasures: Rediscovering Baltimore's Forgotten Movie Theaters* (*Image 1*). A fire in 1949 ended its use as a theatre. For over two decades, the building then served as an extension of the adjacent seafood restaurant, Wilson's, until it was purchased by the Arch Social Club in 1972. It has served the Arch Social Club as a social hall and entertainment venue for almost fifty years.

The Arch Social Club is the oldest known continuously operating African American social club in the United States and the oldest predominately African American social club in

Baltimore. Incorporated in 1912 by Raymond Coates, Jeremiah Hill and Samuel Barney, the club's constitution stated that the purpose of the club was "for social, moral and intellectual uplift of its members and in order that charity may be practiced in a Christian-like spirit and true friendship and brotherly love promoted and maintained." The Arch Social Club was created as an organization that could lend respite and recreation to the African American community with no regard to class distinction and a space for the economic, social and cultural networks to come together.

Site Conditions/Architectural Description: The two-story Beaux Arts theatre was originally part of a row of buildings; today, its side elevation (facing north) is visible due to demolition for the metro station constructed in the 1980s. The façade of the building was altered over the course of the 20th century. Today, the first floor of the façade features decorative columns and a large storefront system, which was restored in 2013, after being covered over with vertical wooden siding since the 1950s (likely precipitated by the fire in 1949). A three-sided movie marquee was added to the façade in 1942 but was removed in the 1970s (*Image 1 and 2*). The ornate decorative details of the upper stories have not been altered. These include the two-story Corinthian pilasters, an interim pediment above a tympanum that features bas relief sculptures of lounging female figures holding the Greek masks of tragedy and comedy, surrounded by objects that represent the arts, including a stringed instrument, a paint palette with brushes, and a film reel. The muses frame a large arched central window on the second floor. The façade is topped with a dentilled cornice flanked by simpler pilasters, and a tall parapet wall that originally served as advertisement signage for the theatre. The façade was restored by the Arch Social Club in 2012, and the current signage on the building was installed in 2013 (*Image 3*).

BACKGROUND

- The Arch Social Club was designated as a Baltimore City Landmark in 2003.
- Staff has reviewed previous work for this building such as the restoration of the concrete façade and installation of a new storefront system in 2012, and the installation of signage on the façade in 2013.
- This proposed project received funding in late 2018 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Partners in Preservation grant program and has leveraged private funding as well.
- The proposed marquee and LED signage do not conform to the signage regulations under the current zoning category of this property. This will require that the zoning code be amended to allow for the proposed sign as an electronic sign type and then to allow for it in the existing zoning category. If the property is rezoned to a commercial category instead, an electronic sign would be allowed, but not on the existing marquee. In either scenario an amendment to the zoning code is required and the applicant would still require a variance for the square footage of the proposed LED sign. These reviews are outside of CHAP's purview and will require City Council legislation and subsequent approval by the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals (BMZA). Planning staff is working with the applicant to identify best possible solutions, but these processes will occur after the CHAP review.

PROPOSAL & APPLICATION OF GUIDELINES

The applicant proposes to construct a marquee that is historically compatible to the building, based on photographic evidence of the circa 1940s marquee. This new marquee will be constructed with bronze pressed metal on a structural metal frame, which will project ten feet over the sidewalk. Due to current building codes, the marquee will be supported on a steel armature that is cantilevered from the interior mezzanine level. This will require the replacement of a couple windows to accommodate the steel armature, but the windows will be replaced in kind to match existing, simply altered to allow for the armature to pass through the façade.

The marquee will feature small LED lights around the frames of each elevation of the marquee. The front of the marquee will have back-lit metal letters spelling ARCH SOCIAL CLUB. The proposal also calls for an LED screen on two sides of the marquee, each approximately 24 square feet in size, which will be visible to pedestrians along both Pennsylvania and North Avenues. The applicants have submitted documentation of LED screens used on a historic theatre marquee in Michigan in order to demonstrate the visual impact of these screens, and the superior level of control with this technology in terms of brightness, color, design, and other factors. The underside of the marquee will have downlights, as is typical for marquees, and which will improve the lighting at the entrance of the club.

The proposed alterations are being considered under the Baltimore City Historic Preservation Design Guidelines *Chapter 1: Design Guidelines for Building Exteriors*, Section 1.11 Lighting, Section 1.12 Signage and Awnings, and *Chapter 6: Design Guidelines for Artistic Expression*, Section 6.3 Signs.

Conformity to Guidelines

Section 1.11 Lighting:

- Select fixtures that are compatible with the period and design of the building and will not rust and stain the building. Select fixtures that are appropriately scaled to the specific mounting location.
 - The lighting around the edges of the marquee faces are small LED lights that will be evocative of historic movie marquee lighting. The downlights on the underside of the marquee will also be compatible.
- Where improved light levels are required, lighting shall be designed to evenly illuminate the façade without creating distorting shadows, spilling onto adjacent property, or shining directly outwards. In most cases do not use colored light sources which alter the color of the building. Minimize the size of new light fixtures and place in non-visible locations wherever possible.
 - The lighting underneath the marquee will improve light levels without creating distorting shadows, shining onto adjacent properties, or shine outwards.
- For energy conservation, install the lowest light levels required and use energy efficient light sources.
 - The lights will be LED, which are energy efficient.

Section 1.12 Signage and Awnings:

- Signs on commercial buildings should respect the existing architectural features and be compatible in scale, color, material, and design with the building. Generally, neon and flashing signs are discouraged.
 - The signs will be located on the marquee, which will replicate a historic marquee in size and location. The proposed LED signs will not flash nor will there be neon.
- The design, size, materials, and placement of new signs and awnings should respect the architectural style and original fabric of the historic building. The scale, color, material, ornamentation, and lettering styles of signs and awnings should complement the building.
 - The proposed marquee is designed to complement the early-20th c. building in its scale, color, material, and ornamentation. The fixed signage on the marquee complements the building, and the LED signage offers complementary lettering as well.
- Place signs on areas of the building that were historically intended to receive signage, such as large plate glass windows, transoms, awnings, broad plain fascias in a storefront cornice, blank wall areas above a storefront cornice, spandrels, and other flat, unadorned surfaces of the facade. Signs flush with the building's façade are preferred.
 - The three faces of the marquee were historically intended to receive signage.
- Do not cover, or obscure, architectural details when installing new signage and awnings.
 - The marquee will partially cover and obscure architectural details, but there is a historic precedent for this marquee, and these architectural features will still be visible from the interior of the building.
- Keep signage simple and easy to read. Orient storefront signage and awnings to the pedestrian. Signs and awnings should not generally project more than three to four feet from the façade.
 - The LED signs will be oriented toward pedestrians.
- Concealed, indirect lighting is preferred for signage in the historic areas. Internally lit signs are generally inappropriate in a historic context. Signs that flash, move, or have inappropriately scaled graphics should not be permitted.

Historically, movie marquees were internally illuminated, and these LED signs can give the appearance of the historic marquee signage. In the context of this property, staff finds the LED signs to be appropriate. As per the Baltimore City signage regulations, the LED signs will not flash, move, or feature graphics. Section 6.3 Signs:

- CHAP will consider the use of digital or projected signage per the terms of any Signage Overlay District in effect.

- There is no Signage Overlay District on the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor, and the applicants are working with staff from the Department of Planning regarding compliance with the Signage regulations.

NEIGHBORHOOD COMMENTS

The Arch Social Club is not located within a CHAP district; therefore, comments from an Architectural Review Committee are not applicable. However, the surrounding community associations and organizations were notified of this project and hearing: Penn North Community Association, Upton Planning Committee, Druid Heights CDC, Pennsylvania Avenue Black Arts District, Pennsylvania Avenue Main Street, and Pennsylvania Avenue Merchants Association.

ANALYSIS

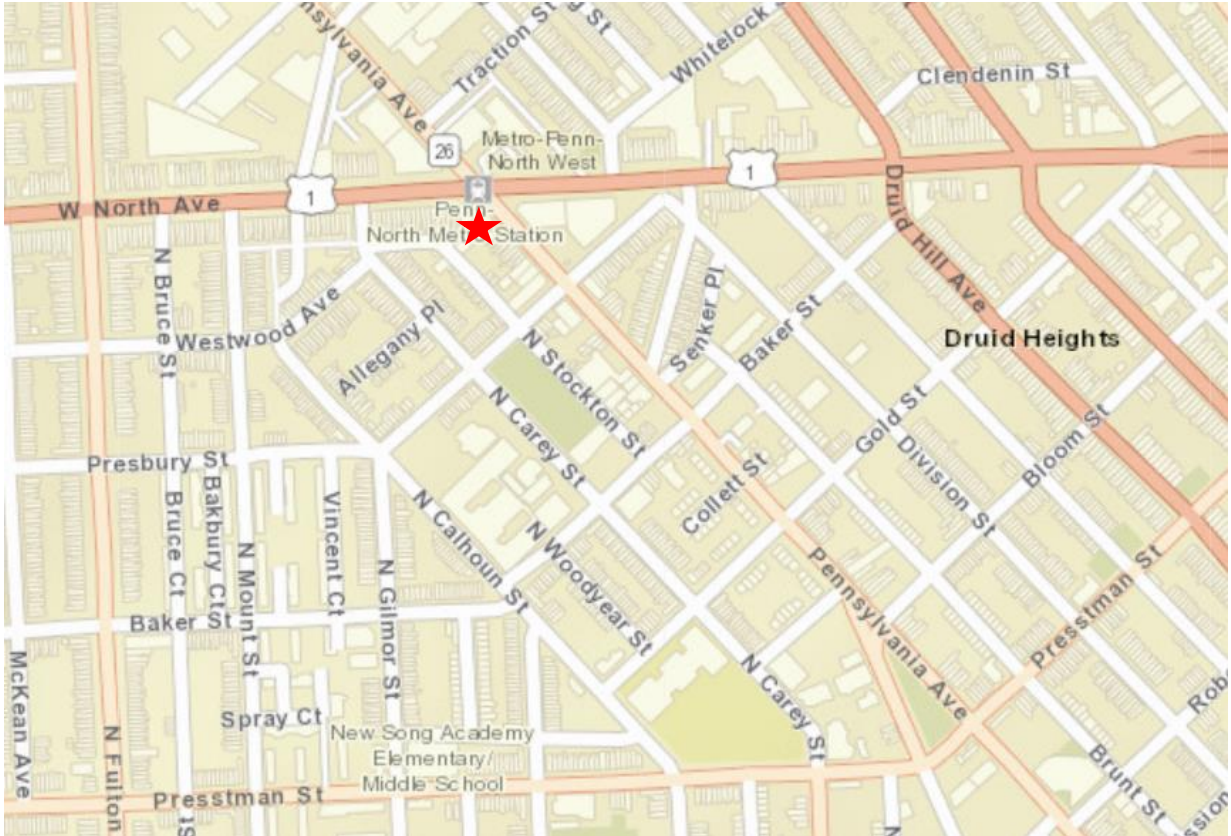
CHAP staff has reviewed the submission and finds that the proposal meets CHAP guidelines because this property historically had a movie marquee that is being replicated in size and overall design, and the LED signage will not flash or move.

RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends approval of the marquee and LED signage with final details to be reviewed by CHAP staff.



Eric Holcomb
Executive Director

MAPS AND IMAGES



Map 1: Location of Arch Social Club, 2426 Pennsylvania Ave., marked with red star.



Map 2: Detailed location map of the Arch Social Club, with the property outlined in red.



Image 1: Façade covered with T1-11 plywood siding and the marquee in September 1977. (Credit: Theatre Historical Society of America, Catalog # NC 0665).



Image 2: 1992 photo of the Arch Social Club. (Credit: Elizabeth Jo Lampl, CHAP, National Register of Historic Places Form, B-4482, Maryland Historical Trust, <https://mht.maryland.gov/secure/Medusa/PDF/BaltimoreCity/B-4482.pdf>.)



Image 3: The façade following restoration in 2013. (Image provided by applicant)